LIVING SOCIAL: HOW TO USE SOCIAL NARRATIVES AS A BEHAVIOR INTERVENTION

By

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ABSTRACT

Peer-related social competencies can have a major impact on classroom success. While some students can learn these social competencies through observation and imitation of others, other students require intensive intervention in social skills to be able to interact appropriately with others. This article presents social narratives as a behavioral intervention option for educators. Detailed steps describe 5 stages of the intervention process: (i) identifying target behavior, (ii) establishing baseline, (iii) writing the story, (iv) implementing the intervention, and (v) evaluating effectiveness. Ideas for using multimedia resources in social narratives are provided.

Keywords: Social Stories, Social Narratives, Functional Behavior Assessment, Behavior Intervention, Shaping, Multimedia, Behavior Analysis, Disruptive Behaviors, Anti-Social Behavior, Social Skills, Social Problems, Target Behavior, Replacement Behavior.

INTRODUCTION

Jake sits in his seat peering at nearby classmates while the teacher explains directions for the upcoming spelling test. Jake does not have paper and at this moment cannot even remember his words. The clock ticks loudly, and he watches students begin to pull blank paper from their desks. Jake is overwhelmed with anxiety as the classroom stimuli, the demands of the day, and these new expectations settle on his shoulders. He breaks his pencil point on the desk, shoves his chair backwards, and hides his face from others. His teacher is unable to encourage him to join the others for spelling.

Jake's story is not uncommon. When overwhelmed with frustration, some students shut down because they lack the social skills to cope appropriately (Odom, 2000). When this lack of coping skills combines with disruptive behaviors, a chain of unintended consequences occurs. Labels, stigmas, and peer perceptions can lead to isolation (Gut & Safran, 2002), which exacerbates the social problem.

Children learn most often by watching others, imitating key figures, and paying attention to subtle social cues; however, this is not enough for some students (Brown, 2001; Hall, Peterson, Webster, Bolen, & Brown, 1999; Odom et al. 1999). The difficulty in acquiring social skills is one step in the domino effect leading to classroom success. In fact, competence in social skills is a significant indicator of a student's success in and out of the classroom (Brigman, Lane, Lane, Lawrence, & Switzer, 1999; Smith & Gilles, 2003; Wilson & Shulha, 1995).

Purpose

Educators can minimize social problems, thus maximizing the opportunity for achievement through the use of targeted social skills instruction. This article will explain the use of social narratives as a behavior intervention option for educators. The use of social stories to improve classroom behavior can facilitate classroom success. As inquiry learning grows in popularity with more and more states adopting the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), classrooms in the midst of change: less teacher directed and more student centered. The use of social stories can be part of a multifaceted approach toward addressing the CCSS. The story itself, when written as a partnership between teacher and student or by the student himself, requires the highest level of cognitive skills; the same skills crucial to illustrate a student's depth of knowledge as a 21st century learner (Hess, Jones, Carlock, & Walkup, 2009).

What are social narratives?

Social narratives are original stories used to communicate social instruction by including details relevant to the student. These details are specific to the individual situation,

include specific social cues, and demonstrate appropriate responses. They differ from other story- type interventions because of the short length, personalization, and author (Gray, 2000; Rogers & Myles, 2001). Social narratives can be written by the teacher, the teacher and the student, or only the student. This flexibility and simplicity make social narratives a practical solution for addressing a behavior intervention.

Implementation

Step 1: Identify the Target Behavior

Target behaviors can be identified by the general education teacher, the special education teacher, or another team member (e.g. parent, related services provider, paraprofessional, administrator). The identification of target behaviors results from the use of regular observation, checklists, and anecdotal records. By documenting behaviors and looking for patterns, educators can separate problem behaviors from those which are age- appropriate and less concerning. Behaviors that warrant further action may include those which:

- Offer a risk to the student or others
- Have consequences of social isolation
- Are irritating to the point that the education of others is affected (Crozier & Sileo, 2005).

For example, you may have a student who is too timid to ask a speaker to repeat what was said, and you may have a child who has difficulty listening to the teacher. These two situations will call for different social narratives. Other behavioral situations for which Social narratives may be appropriate include:

- How to ask a question when the teacher is talking
- Ways to stay calm in class
- How to talk to peers on the playground
- Using a quiet voice (in a restaurant, museum, assembly, etc.)
- Greeting people for the first time
- Appropriate line behavior (refraining from pushing)
- Maintaining personal space (Gray, 2000)

Step 2. Gather Baseline Data

For data- gathering purposes, both the target behavior and desired replacement behavior should have precise descriptions so they can be identified, counted, or measured in some way. Words that can be interpreted in multiple ways should be avoided. For example, "active" can mean "leave one's seat without permission," "wiggling during quiet periods of the day," or "preferring to stand during seatwork." With a clearly identified and described target and replacement behavior, data collection methods can be determined. There are four main methods of gathering behavioral data through direct observation: (i) duration, (ii) latency, (iii) event, and (iv) interval (The IRIS Center for Training Enhancements, 2009). See Table 1 for explanations and examples of each type. Data does not have to be collected for the entire school day; rather, collect data during the parts of the day in which the behavior most frequently occurs. If you decide to collect data on both the target behavior and replacement behavior, you do not have to use the same system for collection for each. For examples of data, sample forms, and instructional videos on collecting behavioral data see the IRIS module on Functional Behavior Assessments at http://iris.peabody.vanderbilt.edu/fba/cresource.htm (also available in Spanish).

By examining what happens before and after the behavior

Type	Duration	Procedure	Example
Duration	The length of time a student engages in behavior	Start timer when the student begins the behavior, stop timer when behavior ends	How long was the student out of his seat?
Latency	How long it takes for the behavior to occur	Start timer when the behavior should start, stop timer when the behavior actually begins	Once directions are given, how long does it take for the student to begin working?
Event	How frequently the behavior occurs during a given time	Mark tallies on a piece of paper, use a hand-held counter, etc.	How many times does the student leave his seat without permission during math class?
Interval	Whether or not the behavior occurs during a set time	Mark a data collection sheet to show the presence or absence of the behavior in each pre-determined interval	Divide the class session into 30 second intervals. During how many intervals does the behavior occur?

Note. To view a more detailed form of this table, see (The IRIS Center for Training Enhancements, 2009)

Table 1. Ways to Collect Baseline Data

When people have to wait in line, they can get bored or irritated.
It is OK if I have to wait in line.
When I have to wait in line, I will try to be quiet.
I don't have to worry.
The line will soon move ahead, and I will get my plate.
When I get my plate, I will be able to enjoy my lunch.
But today I have to wait in line, and that is OK.

Figure 1. Sample Social narrative Targeting a Frustrating Situation

occurs, we can better understand how to design a plan for change (Crozier & Sileo, 2005; O'Neill et al., 1997). Once a baseline and hypotheses for the behavior's cause have been established, one may select social narratives as an effective choice for intervention.

Step 3: Write the Social Narrative

An example of a social narrative is found in Figure 1. For the purposes of this article, the sample is in one narrative paragraph. In reality, the story would be separated with no more than 3-4 sentences on each page of the mini-book. Each page can also have pictures to accompany the text. These pictures may be illustrations, clip art, or photographs.

There are guidelines to consider when writing a Social narrative to ensure its effectiveness.

- First, be sure to consider the readability of the text; you want to write the Social narrative so that it is within the comprehension level of the target student.
- Each page should contain one concept with no more than 4 sentences. The number of sentences will vary with the age of the student.
- Choose your words to ensure flexible connotation. For example, usually instead of always and try instead of you will.
- Use a mixture of descriptive, directive, affirmative, and perspective sentence types in the story (Gray & Garand, 1993; Gray, 2000). Some examples are given in Table 2.
- Use a minimal amount of text to tell the story.
- Use no more than one directive sentence per page and one to three descriptive, affirmative, or perspective sentences per page (Crozier & Sileo, 2005).
- Use picture cues for students with limited text comprehension. Simple is better than complex when it comes to graphics. You want the graphics to be simple and to- the- point, without extraneous, potentially distracting information.

Step 4: Implement the Social Narrative Intervention

Once written, the story can be read to or read with the student. You may want to begin by discussing the story's purpose in realistic, gentle terms such as, "You don't seem to be yourself at lunchtime lately. Are you feeling ok?" This approach allows the student to offer his/her honest feelings about the situation. Further conversation will explain how this story will help the student to know how to act so that these feelings are eventually diminished.

The social narrative is designed to be read at least once each day. This reading session can take anywhere from 5-10 minutes. Choice of approach will depend on who authored the story. If the teacher has written the story, an initial read should be conducted by the teacher to ensure comprehension. Once understanding of the story is ensured, the student can decide to read the story himself, have the story read to him, or listen to a recording of the story. The length of use will depend on individual student needs. Some students will need to read the narrative for several weeks, and some will only need a few days.

Social Story	Sentence type	Purpose
Sometimes the lines are long in the cafeteria.	Descriptive	States a fact
When the lines are long, I may have to wait to eat.	Descriptive	Relays information
When people have to wait in line, they can get bored or irritated.	Perspective	Describes feelings, physical state, and opinions of others
It is OK if I have to wait in line.	Affirmative	Reassures the reader
When I have to wait in line, I will try to be quiet.	Directive	Gives the reader an appropriate behavior.
I don't have to worry.	Affirmative	Reassures the reader
The line will soon move ahead, and I will get my plate.	Descriptive/ Affirmative	Explains a fact and reassures the reader
When I get my plate, I will be able to enjoy my lunch.	Affirmative	Reassures the reader.
But today I have to wait in line, and that is OK.	Affirmative	Reassures the reader.

Note. More information about sentence types can be found in Gray (2000).

Table 2. Sample Social Narrative with Sentence Descriptors

However long the narrative is being utilized, it should be kept in a location that is accessible to the student. For example, this location could be in a folder hanging from the student's work station or on a nearby table.

Data collection will continue each day during the implementation phase. It should be conducted with the same procedures used during baseline. Keeping the collection method consistent provides information that is reliable for comparison and evaluation. Once the behavior occurrences reach a level that is socially acceptable, the intervention can be removed.

Step 5: Monitor and Evaluate Progress to Ensure Maintenance

Progress should be monitored into the maintenance phase to ensure adoption of the socially- appropriate behavior (More, 2008). The maintenance phase is the time during which the intervention has been removed, and the student is being watched to determine success of the intervention. Figure 2 shows an example of data for a successful intervention displaying both target and replacement behaviors. Notice that the red line, representing the target behavior, is decreasing, and the blue line, representing the replacement behavior is increasing.

The time for data collection during maintenance varies, but many studies allow maintenance to last one to two weeks before monitoring is stopped, and/or further decisions are made (Bader, 2006; Feinberg, 2002; Samuels & Stansfield, 2012). Data collection that is consistent in duration and type should occur before, during, and after the intervention in order to determine its effectiveness. Anytime behavior is concerned, it's important to remain objective. If more than one person can assist in data collection, the results can be assured reliable and objective.

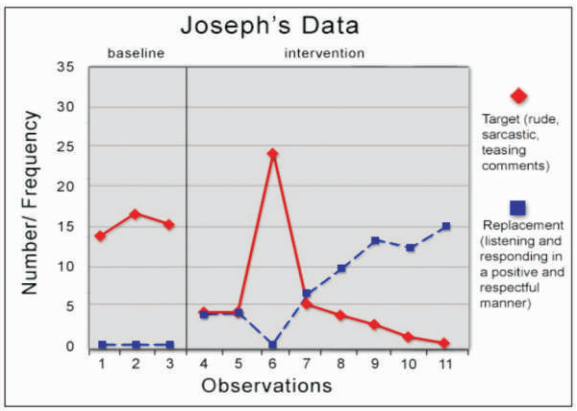

Figure 2. Sample Successful Intervention Data (The IRIS Center for Training Enhancements, 2009)

Social Narratives and Technology

Multimedia social narratives are increasingly popular (Doyle & Arnedillo-Sanchez, 2011; More, 2008; Richter & Test, 2011) Digital and multimedia applications offer students more control over their learning, while also increasing motivation, attitude, and engagement (More, 2008; Yildirim, Ozden, & Aksu, 2001). Social narratives are no longer limited to paper book forms. Though the research is not as substantial on the effectiveness of social narratives in multimedia forms, there are studies that show positive behavioral changes from the use of technology in social narrative interventions:

- Video modeling. The child watches a video form of a social narrative in which he/she demonstrates the appropriate behavior with story narration (Charlop-Christy, Le, & Freeman, 2000; Sansosti & Powell-Smith, 2008).
- PowerPoint and digital photography. The social narrative is told using slide show program software. Pictures can be taken of the child exhibiting replacement behaviors and imported for use in the story (More, 2008).

While the research remains limited on the use of multimedia sources for social story interventions, the availability of software and applications, both iOS and Windows, continues to grow. Many of these resources have the potential to be as effective as the use of traditional paper stories. For example, there are multiple iPad applications that offer versatile storytelling options: Sonic Pics ($2.99), Pinnacle Studio ($12.99), Book Creator ($4.99), MyStory ($1.99), Stories2Learn ($13.99), Explain Everything ($2.99), DoodleCast Pro ($3.99). Examine all resources available to you and their potential effect on student engagement and motivation before making your intervention decision.

Implications

Social narratives fill the demands of rigor required in the 21st century classroom by asking students to perform on both academic and social-behavioral levels. When problem

behaviors are addressed and modified appropriately, classroom routines can be performed without unnecessary angst, students can successfully participate as part of a group, and individual accomplishments become attainable.

Social narratives are also a cross-curricular means of modifying behavior. While addressing the more obvious reading and writing skills, they ultimately allow for participation in all subject areas. Students who benefit from the use of social narratives can actively participate in instruction, inquiry methods, and cooperative learning inside and outside the classroom.

For the teacher, technology has been utilized in both an instructional and a practical sense. The teacher who uses social narratives to address behavioral needs has individualized instruction, provided a model for appropriate behavior, and established high expectations. A strength of social narratives is the discrete nature in which the instruction can be provided. A teacher can read the story with the student at any point during the school day.

Conclusion

Social narratives are a viable intervention to consider for meeting the diverse needs of a heterogeneous group of learners. The social narrative should always be written based on data gathered across multiple days and times. A successful social narrative intervention will have provided the student with tools necessary for classroom achievement, both academic and social.

As with any intervention, social narratives are not designed to address all behavioral needs. For students with disabilities, social narratives should be considered a component of a student's comprehensive educational and behavioral plan, not the entire plan (Crozier & Sileo, 2005).

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